

# BARBARA BARONDESS

## ***Oral History: EDITED VERSION***

Birth Date: July 4 or 14, 1907. Born in Brooklyn, NY.

Interview KECK-019: August 15, 1985 by Edward Applebome in New York, New York

Immigrated with family from Russia and Poland (now Ukraine) at the age of 15

Arrived September 11, 1921 on *The Celtic* (White Star Line),

**Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along.  
Then discuss the answers in your group.**

*Your dramatic skit will focus on what Barbara Barondess and her family needed to enter the U.S. and what personality traits helped them face these challenges.*

**BARONDESS:** I was born in the United States in Brooklyn, New York on the Fourth of July. When I was six months old both of my parents, who had been born in Russia and who fell in love with America and wanted to stay here forever, applied for their first citizenship papers.

[But] then my grandfather in Russia, a very big lumber merchant, persuaded my father and mother to come and bring me to Russia so they could see their first grandchild and also I would learn a little about my origin. They persuaded my parents to wait for at least until I could remember my [grand]parents. We planned to stay there about three or four years and then come back. [But] When I was four years old, my mother became pregnant with my second sister [so they stayed in Russia].

**APPLEBOME:** This is where in Russia that you had gone to?

**BARONDESS:** We were living in a town called Zhitomir (zhi-TAH-meer), just a little way away from Kiev in the Ukraine. [NOTE: Zhitomir was once part of the Russian Empire. After World War I, it was close to the border with the new country of Poland. Before World War II, the city was known for its large Jewish population. Today, the city is part of Ukraine.]

I was a very self-centered child who thought of myself as being very peculiar and unusual. First of all, I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't belong in Russia because I was the little American. They used to call me *Marinka Amerikanka*. And I used to think it was peculiar that I was being pointed at and called the little American. And one day when I said to my mother, "Why do they do that, mama?" She looked at me and she said, "Because you come from that special, wonderful land. It's like coming from the moon, and someday you'll go back there."

**Barbara was born in the U.S. Why did her parents return to Europe?**

Just as I became seven, in 1914, the war broke out. And that stopped our leaving immediately and very soon afterwards, of course, there was the Russian Revolution. By then my mother was pregnant again.

[During the Revolution] We were "wrong" on two counts. We were Jews and we were capitalists [meaning, the family had money]. This was at the height of the [Communist] Revolution. The

czar had just been killed. We were hiding in the cellar for 21 days, which was typical of those days, with *pogroms* and [different] factions taking over...

In 1918, unfortunately, my father was shot through the throat and it was a senseless kind of shooting, and I got the second bullet. I got in the way of it actually, by throwing myself at my father when I saw a man pointing a gun at him, and I got the second bullet in my right shoulder. It just left a souvenir of a little bump. I was not affected, except, of course, emotionally, by that...When my father was shot he was taken to Moscow and operated on by one of the czar's doctors, and they performed the first tracheotomy in history in Russia on his throat. And he never regained his voice completely, but he did talk a little with a very raspy voice after that.

My parents thought that perhaps their first papers [their applications for American citizenship] could get [them] into the United States. We made the decision to steal out of Russia at night. We had no papers of any kind except a little small certificate that my mother managed to save that had been made out by a midwife, reporting my birth on July 14 to the Board of Health in New York. With that little piece of paper, [the family traveled] at night in the hay wagon for two weeks, with prearranged stops where we were able to sleep all day in some farmer's barn, be fed some hot food, and start out again at night. The five of us, a little, my youngest sister was only two months old, my older one was six, and I was twelve. We got out of Russia.

**APPLEBOME:** Your grandparents had stayed?

**BARONDESS:** Oh, yes. They had no way of getting here.

What is a *pogrom*? (Look it up if you need to.)

How did Barbara save her father's life?

How did his wound affect him for the rest of his life?

We had a little gold and a little jewelry and everything that we could carry on us, when we got out of Russia. There wasn't much of anything but gold, and gold, and diamonds and a few things that the family all gathered together. We crossed a boundary line out of Zhitomir, which was fifty miles away from [the] Polish line [border] at that moment. That was 1919. [**NOTE:** The border has since moved hundreds of miles west. Zhitomir is now in the middle of the country of Ukraine.] It was between Christmas and perhaps the first or second day in January of 1919 that we finally got out at night.

My parents decided that it was safer for us to steal across the boundary line to Poland by separating. So my father and I went in one wagon and my mother and the two smaller children in the other. The reason for it was because I could speak Russian and speak for my father if they stopped us. And that's what happened.

We were stopped, my father and I. We landed in a Polish jail, and the Polish jail man couldn't have been nicer. He gave us hot milk and I told him about my father's being shot and that's why he couldn't speak. I gave him the address where we were to meet my mother with the other two children. And I kept telling them that I was an American. And that my mother had a piece of paper but I didn't have the piece of paper. It was too precious for me to have it. But she had it so

if they could get to my mother she could prove I was an American and my parents were taking me back to my country.

My father was put in jail, unfortunately. Just to be held, as so we would be, more or less, immobile, until they got found out what to do with us. They wrote to the [American] embassy in Warsaw. It took almost a year-and-a-half [to get her American passport]. During that year-and-a-half, the Polish government finally let my father out of jail.

[Meanwhile] My mother was busy persuading the Polish authorities that at the time of her birth and my father's birth—because I considered them Russian—that actually that part of the Ukraine where they were born, she proved to them, was owned by Poland. [Since all the national boundaries changed after World War I, the town where her parents were born had become part of Poland, which made her parents Polish citizens.] So they issued them two Polish passports.

**APPLEBOME:** And how were your sisters traveling then?

**BARONDESS:** Uh, well, a husband and a wife could bring their children with them.

Why could Barbara get an American passport, but not her parents?

Why was her father thrown into jail in Poland?

Why did her parents need to get Polish passports? Why not get Russian ones?

**APPLEBOME:** Okay. So you finally all had passports and you could leave Poland.

**BARONDESS:** We could leave Poland. We were able to arrive in England... Unfortunately, as we were walking onto the gangplank [onto the ship], my younger sister tore away from my mother and ran down the gangplank. My mother ran after her and my father and I were at the top as the man said, "What's your name," to my father. My father couldn't speak fast enough [because of the wound in his throat] and they took us off. The boat sailed without us. When we were turned back, my, we were all horrified.

**APPLEBOME:** Who had made the judgment that your father wasn't allowed to enter onto the boat to travel?

**BARONDESS:** The man who stood there and asked for his name and saw that the man couldn't speak. He said... [she makes a raspy sound to imitate her father as he tried to speak]. And I [told the man] my father's name, but they thought he had some infection. Our luggage and everything was right there, next to the boat, as we watched it sail away in tears. The, the drama of all this was unbelievable.

Then my father and mother persuaded, again, the authorities, and we got on to the next boat which was called the Celtic, White Star Line. But there was no room second class, so we went steerage. We were willing to get out any way. We got onto that boat and it was very hot. And, of course, it was very packed. It was too hot and too uncomfortable to sleep and we were too tired and too, you know, upset to even eat the meals. And I slept on the deck. Because sleeping crowded with my middle sister in the bunk was too much, when we got to New York.

[She begins to cry.] You know, I never thought I'd get this emotional about telling my own story. Anyway, because I'm supposed to be an actress, remember, and I'm not supposed to get this emotional about telling my own story. I will never forget my father's and mother's faces as my mother clung to my father, who couldn't speak very well, and tears welled in her eyes and he put his arms around her and all he kept saying in his voiceless voice, "It'll be all right, darling. We'll get through."

My mother used to say something that I never heard before or after. Every time we left a town or arrived in a town she would say, in Russian, "In the good and blessed hour, in the good and blessed hour." She kept repeating that as we were leaving each town and arriving somewhere else. Their prayers and their hopes that my little passport would get them back to America, became the most important piece of paper that we ever owned. I'm going to give to the museum [at Ellis Island]. I feel that's where it belongs.

Why might a ship bound for the U.S. want to keep passengers from boarding if they could not say what their name was?

What do you think "In the good and blessed hour" meant to Barbara's mother?

We finally arrived in New York and I saw that fabulous canyon of steel, that skyline. I was so excited that it was the incredible feeling of elation.

Because we were traveling third class, we had to be processed that way. My father was sent one way, my mother with the children the other way, and I saw the look on my parents' faces of despair. Because my father would be naturally asked his name again, and that this was going to be trouble. And the trouble became Ellis Island.

My mother kept describing to them and telling them to please, he couldn't talk. And the more she said he couldn't talk, the more worried they became over why he couldn't talk. And my piece of paper, she wouldn't let it out of her hand. She was so worried somebody would walk away with it and we would be sent back. So it was a very traumatic experience. And they didn't know what to do with us. I remember that we were taken aside and the line went on. And they went into a big huddle because my passport had a different name and, of course, these people at the, at the door who were allowing us in, didn't speak Russian. And my mother spoke a little English.

**APPLEBOME:** Explain again why the passports had different names.

**BARONDESS:** [The family name was Brandes, but an immigrant uncle had changed it to Barondess. When Barbara was born in the U.S., her father chose the Americanized last name for her instead of the family's original name.] So my passport, on the records, was Barondess, and his passport with his birth name, was Brandes, born in Poland.

The papers for the first citizenship did not materialize until after we got into America... They discovered that by law they were void because they stayed away more than seven years. [Her parents' old application for American citizenship was void because they had waited too long.] So they didn't know what to do with us.

**APPLEBOME:** So you were going to tell us about what it was like on the time that you were staying on Ellis Island.

**BARONDESS:** Actually the guards were very nice to us. The sleeping accommodations were clean and clinical and not luxury, but after two years in Poland and sleeping on the floor with all the crawling bugs that I had to deal with between the age of twelve and fourteen, Ellis Island seemed like a clean jail. And, uh, I didn't mind it.

My father was allowed to be with us all day and they were convinced by then that he didn't have a communicable disease. And my mother was busy with the baby. The other people, it was like, to me it was like the house of Babel. Because there were so many languages and so many people and everybody huddled together and it was so full of fear. It was pathetic. Because the ones that were being held there could be deported. I was told that I could get off with my uncles because they couldn't keep me, but I refused. I said I would not leave without my parents. This was my country and I was born to them here. I was going to stay until they were allowed to come with me. I had that much sense.

I was not badly treated and they would allow me to walk outside. So I used to go and look at this beautiful, fantastic building that as we were arriving looked like a palace and inside looked like a bare jail. And I would ask if I could go out because it was beautiful weather in November. Just to see the Statue of Liberty and to see the skyline of New York. And the guards would let me walk.

I had my first present on the first day. An elementary school book on English that my uncle brought me. I sat there trying to learn English by myself. And I learned the first few words like give me bread and butter. My burning ambition was to be an American and sound like an American, because I was an American. I was determined that once I got off there I would learn to speak English. About three days before we were to leave, I...spent almost the whole night outside of the building praying to the Statue of Liberty, reaching to the sky, [saying,] please reach us.

What was wrong with her parents' application for citizenship that made it void?

Why would Ellis Island officials be so worried that her father's could not speak?

How does she describe Ellis Island? How does she describe the people there?

Well, I didn't have to wait too long to get off. We were convinced that some miracle would happen and we would be able to get off. [She claims that two powerful uncles, including a Supreme Court justice, went to President Harding, who allowed the family to enter the U.S.] However, without terrible drama.

My middle sister, who I was sleeping with, was running a terrible fever. And she was so hot I couldn't sleep with her. And we were trying not to let anybody know that she was running a fever. And she started to break out and she had measles. And we were terribly afraid that they would keep us there because of it.

The day we were leaving the nurse...noticed she was running [a] 102° fever. The nurse came to look at her, and the nurse that came was a big, black woman. And we children had never seen a black person. Because there were none in Russia or Poland where we were brought up. And this

lovely looking big black woman took Rosalie, my sister, and put a thermometer in her mouth and saw her fever and took her away from us. And this child was absolutely petrified. She thought she was leaving us forever. They took her to the hospital and she had measles. She was quarantined. So the day we were to leave, which was the next day, we had to leave without her and we couldn't go to see her. Of course, my sister couldn't speak English and the nurse couldn't speak Russian. So this was a terrible trauma for my sister who never got over it, and for us.

But we knew it would be all right because there was a telegram from the President of the United States, signed by President Harding. That said my father was to be appointed, he was examined by doctors, he was perfectly all right. Then [her wealthy uncle] Joseph Barondess guaranteed that we would never be wards of the State. And that he could become my guardian because I was under age. Two years it took me to go through.

**APPLEBOME:** So you're going to tell us any other memories that you have about the time that you spent on Ellis Island?

**BARONDESS:** The time that I spent on Ellis Island seemed like the longest waiting period for me, because of the regimen [a strict schedule, like in the military]. Naturally, there had to be a regimen. It was no way that they could handle that many people, I can realize it now, in retrospect. But at the time it was a nightmare. You [had] to take a bath [at a certain time]. You had to wait in line to get the food. You had to get in line to get a blanket. You had to be examined physically. They [the guards] weren't unkind, but you had no communication with the people who took care of you. They had so many people to take care of. And you had no communication with the other people that were there because everybody was so full of their own fright. [But]...we were lucky enough to be special. And the special thing was my American passport.

Why didn't they let Barbara's sister go with the family, even though she was sick?

What is a "ward of the state"? Why did her uncle have to promise that the family would not become wards of the state?

**APPLEBOME:** What did your mother and father do during the day?

**BARONDESS:** Talk about what we were going to do when we got off. Make plans. Talk to us to give us courage. My father, of course, couldn't speak much. He wrote. He gave me his ten commandments. Told me not to blame anybody for anything. These are circumstances that we couldn't do anything about. To have no bitterness. To be grateful for the marvelous luck of having been born here. So I'm grateful for all my blessings. I'm even glad for having been on Ellis Island, believe it or not. If I didn't have that as a measuring stick, I wouldn't have been able to put all the frustrations behind me.

I remember Brooklyn and I remember going to school. The [other students] thought I was a "greenhorn" because I was fourteen and they were seven or eight. [But] I went through Erasmus Hall High School in one year as an unmatriculated student... I enrolled at NYU for special English lessons and to learn how to speak and have perfect diction. I got a job at a bank, I went to college at night...

I was swimming in the Luna Park large pool, when somebody stuck [her] into a beauty contest [and she] won the title of Miss Greater New York and Modern Venus. Thirteen New York newspapers ran my picture on the front page the next day.

The Shubert [Theatre] put me into my first show in 1926, the year I became Miss Greater New York, five years after I got off Ellis Island. I went into a Broadway show. [She appeared on Broadway in several shows, including *Topaz*.] I was invited by MGM to come to Hollywood, where I made twenty-nine [motion] pictures altogether, between silents and the first talkies.

After that I decided that I would quit as an actress. I went to college and studied interior design and architecture and I became a nationally known interior designer in the next forty years. I had the pleasure of doing our present President's house, Mr. Reagan's house, when he was married to his first wife, a very fine actress, Jane Wyman.

Everything is possible in the United States. If you're willing to work, you can be anything you want. And if we are realistic about our talents. Because ambition is not always as big as your talent. This is the only country in the world that gives you the opportunity and the education. There are schools to go to, night schools, free classes, books to read.

And my best girlfriend, the Statue of Liberty, is probably gonna get my ashes because I refuse to be buried anywhere but have my ashes dropped in front of her.

What values or beliefs did Barbara's parents pass on to her that helped keep her in life?

Why was speaking perfect English so important to her?

What do you think a "greenhorn" was?

What does she think you need to do to be successful in America?

# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

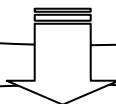
**NAME** of immigrant: **BARBARA BARONDESS** **FROM:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YEAR** she came to the US: \_\_\_\_\_ **AGE** upon arrival: \_\_\_\_\_

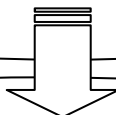
**PUSH-PULL:** Why did her family decide to come to America?

**BECAUSE:**

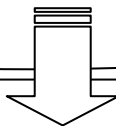
**During their journey in Europe:**



**What they needed to get to the US:**



**At Ellis Island:**



**In the U.S.: '**